

[Review] David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer (2015) Understanding national identity

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David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer. *Understanding National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 226 pp. £18.99 pbk.).

This book forms a strong backbone for the sociological study of national identity in the United Kingdom. *Understanding National Identity* benefits from the authors' twenty years of research and aims to demonstrate "that national identity really matters; not simply as a badge which we are given at birth and which we carry throughout our lives, like it or not" (p. 7). For the authors, national identity has been understudied within the social sciences, at the expense of attention to nations and nationalism, making national identity "the underdeveloped offspring of these muscular parents" (p. 9) and they address this gap constructively. The book features nine chapters, each of which moves closer to the demystification of national identity; the authors examine what is sociologically interesting about national identity, the scales of national identity (individual, organisational, institutional), its intersection with social identities (class, gender, ethnicity), the specific lived experiences of people in a border town, claims to national identity in terms of imagined homogeneity, the role of politics in relation to national identity, as well as ethnicity and processes of 'othering'. After this multi-faceted questioning of British identity, they suggest that national identity has not and does not wither away.

McCrone and Bechhofer outline key theoretical debates from the social sciences on the construction of the self and of national identity, and challenge the infamous quote of Margaret Thatcher in which she denounces the existence of society. They evoke symbolic interactionism as an overarching framework and discuss the processes by which it is possible to study national identity. The authors move on to explore the meaning of national identity for people in England, Scotland and Wales, with a focus on the discursive and affective dimensions, highlighting the identification of the self with the nation. The role of geography and its fine line when it comes to borders and nationality is also discussed through interview material with inhabitants of Berwick, a town on the English-Scottish border where the 'in' and 'out' group dynamics are imagined differently. The 'English question' is appraised through the questioning of national identity as a political and cultural construct, spurred by the poem *The Secret People* by G. K. Chesterton which, although written before World War I, still carries resonance in the articulation of identities. For the authors, "one's own sense of national identity is only loosely connected to how national and state symbols are identified" (p. 201). By no

means is this an uncontested articulation, as national identity is constructed on the basis of a notional other – the authors explore English and Scottish vis-à-vis British identity to highlight this. There is continuous reflection in this book's dynamic understanding of national identity that is "malleable and varies as it is appropriate according to context" (p. 186). In the final chapter, future areas for research on national identity are identified in terms of rising populism as well as the calculus of race in discourses around migration.

Understanding National Identity is an important read for students and scholars seeking to understand how national identity is imagined, articulated and negotiated. The book is rich with research material, and benefits from the long collaboration of the two authors. Their methods include interviews, ethnography and social surveys. The focus on the United Kingdom does not detract from the value of the argument. National identities across the European continent are being evoked beyond banality, with the financial crisis fuelling the rise of regressive populism (Wodak et al 2013), increasing Euroscepticism, as well as the refugee crisis coming up against both transnational humanitarianism and regressive nationalism.

There are two dimensions of the discussion of national identity that could be developed further. The first one concerns the mobilisation of national identity in different campaigns for or against a referendum. Also, how is cultural production in cases such as *The Secret People* mobilised in discourses around contemporary nationhood? Secondly, there is a strong tradition of studying national identity and the media in the field of media and cultural studies (Morley and Robins 1995). The authors discuss Michael Billig's theory of *Banal Nationalism* (1995), but do not engage in a discussion of how the media are increasingly important in the forging or reorganisation of national identity, with the exception of mention of diasporic media (p. 117). There are certainly strong ties to be forged in interdisciplinary research about national identity. Yet, this book provides a good starting point for understanding the complexities of national identity.

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